Week 3: reading note

Space, Place, and Power

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This week’s readings move away from a geometrical understanding of space, a top-down and rationalised approach to its production. Rather, they emphasise the experiential nature of space and the notion of place-making, the process through which the self and place are interconnected. As such, they provide an alternative conceptualisation of space in relation to the production of power and knowledge. Michel de Certeau argues against the Foucauldian understanding of power as panoptic, which refers to the disciplinary techniques through which power is exerted. To ameliorate our understanding of the relation between power and resistance, de Certeau proposes to examine spatial practices in space that is produced by disciplinary apparatuses.

The act of walking provides insight into the interaction between strategies, spatial organisation, and tactics, the way in which we use urban space. Through walking, we actualise spatial configuration, increase possibilities of using that design, and violate the prohibitions of it. Thus, tactics, the actual ways of using of urban space, is the locus of resistance. The notion of walking the city, then, is in dialectical tension with the strategic process of naming places. Walking, on the one hand, entails creativity and fluidity, while place names aim to reduce particular spaces to a fixed signifier and thereby creating “nowhere in places,” rendering the experiences of that space invisible.

Basso’s ethnography of the Western Apache, however, points towards a different conceptualisation of place. In contrast to de Certeau’s notion of place as location, which is the result of strategic production, the Western Apache consider places as sources of knowledge because of the experiences of ancestors that happened in particular places. As a result, place names refer to ancestral stories and become intimately connected to the cultivation of wisdom. As such, Basso argues, “selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined” (146). This process of place-making, then, relates to Heidegger’s conception of dwelling through which a sense of belonging, rootedness, is established. Yet, the Western Apache explicitly live places in the company of others, whereas Heidegger seems to put forward an individualistic understanding of dwelling.

Thus, place-making is not only constructing a past but also entails an imagination – it produces social and individual identities. Here we find yet another contrast with de Certeau who notes that “memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable” (108). In fact, for the Western Apache memory and place are indistinguishable – “wisdom sits in places”. In that sense, unlike de Certeau’s argument that memories, as form of knowledge, of places remain silent and difficult to access, Basso shows that places are associated with stories that provide moral lessons and thus are vehicles of knowledge. The stories are integral part of child-rearing and are explicitly used to cultivate “smoothness of the mind”, namely the capacity of avoiding harmful events by detecting threatening circumstances which are not clearly visible. Place names, as such, do not obscure experiences but emphasise the relation between moral imagination and places.